

Let maps to other, worlds on worlds have shown

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by [middlemarch](#)

Summary

If time had lingered over the embrace, what could Alina had wrought?

Notes

Title from John Donne.

If she were anyone else, Aleksander would have asked himself what Alina was playing at, coming to him untailored in her grey velvet robe and her dark hair braided into elegance by Genya, talking to him as if they were childhood friends and then helping him into his kefta like any otkazat'sya wife, letting her hands drift from his shoulders to his biceps before stepping back. If she were anyone else, he would have drawn back into himself and watched when she walked around to stand in front of him, but she was Alina and so he waited. She took too much time for him to be astonished when she reached up to cup his cheeks between her slender hands and pulled him down for the softest kiss he'd ever had. He would not have thought such a kiss would move him so, a kiss that was not charged with passion as much as tenderness and a compelling, suffusing warmth, a kiss like an endearment murmured in the very dark hours of the early morning, after the moon had gone, well before the dawn.

He expected her to break away after a moment, to look up at him shyly or perhaps well-pleased with herself, but he was wrong. She stroked his beard and then the hair at the nape of his neck, her tongue in his mouth as gentle, as seeking. There was no demand, nor yet any hesitancy about her. He let his hand drop to her waist and she moved closer, pressing herself against him; he could feel how much smaller she was, how frail she had been not only from suppressing her power but from being orphaned, going hungry, being dismissed, ignored. He felt her growing more eager but still intent on showing him he was not the Darkling, not the General, but Aleksander, his name sweet, desirable. Lovable. He moved his hand to her breast and then within her robe; she was finely made, not lush, and he was struck by an image of her in a bed, not his but theirs, amid a tumble of white linen untying the ribbon of her night-shift and watching her smile at him as he kissed his way down from her throat, the room full of sunlight she had not had to summon.

It was merzost she was making with her lips and her tongue and her hands which Genya could never quite free from calluses, she was conjuring something between them that had no precedent in his long life or any of the lives that had been lived before him; their power was secondary to some other process she'd begun, one that was part devotion, though neither of them was a true saint, and part joy, though they'd each been formed by such rending grief. Light and shadow danced though their bodies were nearly still. There was nothing frantic, nothing desperate. She'd divined something he'd never learned, Alina in her grey bed-robe and her bound hair, her hand at his throat, palm slipped beneath his kefta to rest upon his beating heart. He wanted her so much and she kept finding ways with that soft, hot mouth and those clever, deft hands to tell him he was going to get what he wanted, that she would not give herself but share. He wanted to be loved and she loved him; he wanted to love her and she arched up into him and said yes oh yes. It was merzost she was making and it wasn't an abomination. Distantly, the Fold trembled and the volcra retreated to their dim nests and slept and the Stag in the woods leapt, but Aleksander only knew Alina, the rich taste of her mouth and the warmth of her skin, the scent of irises and ink, and how he waited to hear her voice when pulled away, whether he would hear laughter or tears or the beginning of a song whose words they'd never known.

"Not many people surprise me, Miss Starkov," he said. It sounded like a promise.

“Oh, well, most people surprise me, General Kirigan,” she said, letting him see *except for you* in her dark eyes, her reddened lips. Her smile, which looked like a vow.

“Aleksander,” he said. After what she’d wrought, he shouldn’t need to hear her say it but he did.

“Aleksander,” she said because she understood him. Because she understood him, she added, “Mustn’t be late” and walked out of the room. She had just broken every clock so he nodded and let her see how he ran his thumb over his lower lip and turned his face into the sun.

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